

PROTEST SATURDAY AGAINST CALTRANS DESTRUCTION IN NILES CANYON, PUBLIC HEARING APRIL 14th

San Francisco Sold Caltrans Public Land Where Trees Were Cut



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Niles, CA – Conservation and community groups will hold a protest this Saturday of the Caltrans cutting of native trees in Niles Canyon and plans to further destroy trout habitat along Alameda Creek as part of a damaging, unnecessary and controversial project to widen Highway 84 through Niles Canyon. **The protest will be held April 9, from 3-5 pm at the corner of Mission Blvd. and Niles Canyon Road in Fremont.**

“This project will actually make the canyon more dangerous for drivers and cyclists, waste \$76 million in public funds, degrade important trout habitat in Alameda Creek and jeopardize a decade of restoration efforts, blight a designated scenic highway, and ruin the natural beauty of Niles Canyon,” said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, Save Niles Canyon, Save Our Sunol, Friends of Coyote Hills, Southern Alameda County Sierra Club, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Tri-City Ecology Center, and Local Ecology and Agriculture Fremont are all opposing the Niles Canyon Highway “Improvement” Project. State Senator Ellen Corbett and Assemblymember Bob Weickowski have asked Caltrans to reopen the comment period for phase two of the project. These representatives have set up a second public meeting with Caltrans to address community concerns regarding the project. **The meeting will be held on Thursday, April 14, from 6:30-8:30 pm, at the Fremont Teen Center, 39770 Paseo Padre Parkway, in Fremont.**

Caltrans has already destroyed over 100 mature native trees and damaged trout habitat as part of phase one of the project. Caltrans refused to conduct a transparent and thorough environmental review and has not been forthcoming in disseminating information to the public about the project. Despite assurances there would be no more tree cutting until another public meeting is held, Caltrans continues to destroy trees alongside the creek. Caltrans plans further destruction this summer through filling portions of the creek channel and floodplain with concrete retaining walls and rip-rap boulders.

The Alameda Creek Alliance has learned that the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission transferred title and gave legal easements of 1.7 acres of public lands in Niles Canyon along Alameda Creek to Caltrans in 2010 for construction of phase one of the project, the areas where trees have been cut and further impacts to the creek are planned. The Alameda Creek Alliance is lobbying the SFPUC to ensure no additional public land is transferred for phase two.

There have been regular protests in Niles and more than 170 local residents attended a hearing last month to oppose the project, despite only one day notice. After being inundated with protest letters and excoriated by

an angry crowd at the hearing, Caltrans a second public meeting and stated that no more trees would be cut before this hearing - yet Caltrans continued to cut trees along Alameda Creek.

Despite severe inadequacies in the environmental review process and failure to adequately notify or inform the public of the project, Caltrans refuses to put the project on hold and has yet to answer public comments and questions posed to them – reportedly Caltrans will answer questions from the first hearing at the April 14 meeting. There are major discrepancies between state safety data and Caltrans' rationale for the project. Questions remain about the purported safety benefits, severe environmental impacts, flagrant waste of public funds, and potential economic and aesthetic impacts on the communities of Niles and Sunol. These issues were not adequately evaluated in the environmental review for phase one.

Last fall, Caltrans began environmental review for phase two of the project, which would take out nearly 500 more trees in the middle of the canyon and damage more irreplaceable trout habitat by adding nearly two additional miles of retaining walls and armoring along the creek. The Regional Water Quality Control Board announced it “would be unlikely to issue the necessary approvals for this project” due to significant environmental impacts. The second phase is scheduled to begin in 2012.

The project would widen much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median, and 2-foot to 8-foot shoulders. The proposed widening and more than four miles of huge cement retaining walls and rip-rap would require cutting 439 native trees from the Alameda Creek riparian corridor. The retaining walls, earthmoving for cut and fill and rip-rap would harm important habitat for steelhead trout, California red-legged frog, Alameda whipsnake, rare sycamore forest habitat, and other native wildlife. There are less environmentally damaging alternatives Caltrans has not evaluated such as installing radar speed signs, median barriers, and rumble strips, focusing on localized problem areas, trimming or removing selected trees, or other measures within the existing roadway footprint. The City of Fremont voted earlier this year to pursue banning large trucks from Niles Canyon, since trucks cause a disproportionate number of traffic accidents (38%) in the canyon and most of the fatal accidents. Trucks often use the canyon to avoid the truck scales on Highway 680, contributing to unsafe truck traffic.

Alameda Creek is an ‘anchor watershed’ considered regionally significant for restoration of threatened steelhead trout to the entire Bay Area. Since 1997, numerous organizations and agencies have cooperated on restoration projects to allow migratory fish from the Bay to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek. Thirteen fish passage improvement projects, including dam removals, construction of fish ladders, and installation of fish screens, have been completed in the watershed since 2001. Several more projects in the lower creek are expected to be completed by 2011-2013, allowing steelhead to migrate upstream into Niles Canyon and the upper watershed for the first time in half a century.

The Alameda Creek Alliance (www.alamedacreek.org) is a community watershed group with over 1,850 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout and protect endangered species in the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.